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Jarvis, P. (2016) Review of Pre-School Childcare in England 1939–2010, Angela Davis. *Women's History Review*. DOI. 10.1080/09612025.2016.1248048

Book Title: Pre-School Childcare in England 1939-2010

Authors: Angela Davis

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This is clearly a book that has filled an important niche, particularly for students of early years policy and practice. While much information is available on early principles of nursery practice such as those created by Froebel and Montessori, it is difficult to locate information about day-to-day practice in nursery education and childcare in the past. The text is, in general, quite easy to follow for practitioner-students, in terms of being highly focused upon practice rather than theory, and for this reason, I will definitely be recommending it to my early years practitioner students in September.

Davis starts by informing the reader that she has based the text upon archival research and interviews undertaken with 53 participants, drawn from a mixture of parents, practitioners and people who were children attending nursery between 1939 and 2010, declaring her intention to approach the topic from 'the supply rather than the demand' perspective (p.ix). This works well for the most part but at times, the direction and context would be improved by some reflection upon the historically-specific political environment and the position of women and children within this. While it is accepted that this was not intended as a heavily theoretical text, an

occasional, well-appointed reference to theory of, for example gender and/or maternalism would have improved the narrative. One place where this would have been particularly useful is in the context of the book's discussion of the 'discouragement' of working mothers at times when austerity governments drastically cut funding for children under five.

Davis sets out her points in clear, plain English, which is another feature that marks the book out as a useful text for practitioner students taking modules or completing dissertations that require the study of historical early years practice. The introduction is also quite thorough, clearly framing the ongoing fragility of services for children under five, the positive correlation between national need for women in the workforce and the provision of state-sponsored nursery education/ daycare. This narrative follows the differential impacts of war and peace throughout the twentieth century during which provision 'see-sawed', depending upon governments' need for mothers in the national workforce to replace absent men serving in the armed forces, and the advent of neo-liberalist constructs of society at the dawn of twenty-first century in which early years care became routinely provided as a professional rather than family-located service. In order to illustrate these points, however, Davis relies heavily on basic statistical information, and these sections are not always very easy to follow, given that the figures are presented within the text of the chapter. A more reader-friendly way to do this would have been to set the statistics out in tables and/or graphs, highlighting key points for the reader within the narrative. Additionally, the text sometimes moves abruptly between different sources of data without adequate signposting. For example on p.75, I was left wondering who 'Margot' and

'Jean' were, until I realised that the author had now moved from a discussion of secondary source material onto issues derived from her primary research.

At times the headings/ chapter structure could also have been more clearly constructed, for example in the summary of chapter contents, and in chapter 3 where the text moves rather abruptly between diverse practice in different English regions and national issues that arose in the development of nursery nurse training. This discussion of early years practitioner training would have benefitted from taking a broader scope; in particular, it would have been greatly enhanced by a short introduction summarising the heated, essentially unresolved debate that took place on this topic within the fledgling Nursery School Association during the 1920s, which derived from the care/ education dichotomy that endures to the present within the field of early years practice.

The book is clearly the result of an impressive body of research, both in archives and with respect to the collection of primary data. It does a good job of 'painting a picture' of the progress of early years education and care across an eventful seventy year period, and as the author promises at the beginning of the text, there is a very refreshing and unusual 'user' perspective, which gives much attention to the memories of mothers and children who accessed early years services during the relevant period, whilst also giving a voice to those who practiced within them. Students with a strong practice focus will no doubt be amused to read the comment from a practitioner who trained in the 1960s: 'there probably was lots of theory, but I probably would have fallen asleep' (p.129), indicating that although much has changed in the early years field, some things remain constant!

Overall, while I was impressed with the breadth of the information presented, I would have liked the text to be rather better organised around a stronger theoretical core; for example the maternalist impetus within which the 'care' elements of early years practice are so deeply embedded, and its complex, highly changeable relationship with the succession of governments that have constructed early years services over the past seventy years. However, the book is still very useful and highly accessible to students seeking to know how the practices in which they currently engage developed over time. The discussion of parental involvement in early years education and care is a particularly strong thread throughout the text.

Correspondingly, I found that I oriented to the book very much as a mother, in the sense that it powerfully evoked memories of 'helping out' at Playschool during the 1980s; it was less successful at addressing me as a historical researcher in the area of early years theory and practice. I suspect those who have a history of professional practice in the early years field would orient similarly; in that the text would evoke past memories of practice. This makes it strong in the sense of oral history, and a unique resource in a field which is heavy with texts exploring the theories of historical pioneers such as Bowlby, Piaget, Froebel and Montessori. As such I am sure it will make a very useful addition to the libraries of all institutions which train and educate students who both practice and aspire to practice within early years education and care.